

Advice to Creative Writing Students: Showing Versus Telling: Telling how it's done.

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概 要

この講義は文学を創造することに基礎をおいている。そして文を書くための助言の多くは学生の作文、とりわけ創造的な作文にとって適切なものである。講義は三つの主たる考えとさらにもう一つ、学生に「見せるが、語らず」という概念を理解してもらうための一般的な提案に議論を集中している。つまりこれが講義の書くことについての主たる内容である。四つの主要な点といろいろな例を通して一具体的なものから抽象的な考えを表現する、要約しすぎることは避ける、物語を必要なところは場面を通して見せる、受身的または間接的な声の頻繁な使用は避ける—講義は「語らない」やり方を「見せる」という試みを行う。

I. Introduction

There are many pieces of advice given to students and practitioners of creative writing aimed at improving and developing their craft. One of the most confusing, but most often uttered piece of advice is, “Show, don’t tell”. A quick search of this term on Google will return more results than inhabitants of Australia. Three and a half times more. For beginning writers in particular, it is a valuable piece of advice. Yet, if the beginning writer cannot understand or apply the advice, it is useless. The following lecture explores three points of this concept in detail, those being:

1. Express the abstract through the concrete
- 2a. Avoid over-summarisation and

2b. Show the story through scenes where necessary

3. Be wary of overusing the passive and indirect voice,

The lecture attempts to ‘show’ how *not* to ‘tell’ by providing examples and explanation which will hopefully decode and illuminate this ironically ‘hard to pinpoint’ concept.

1. Expressing the Abstract Through the Concrete

My friend’s mother smokes a pack of cigarettes a day and has done all her life. All throughout my friend’s childhood, her mother warned her of the dangers of smoking, yet from the age of twelve onwards she picked up the habit. Now her habit is worse than her mother’s. When she was younger her mother found cigarettes in her daughter’s school bag and confronted her. My friend pointed out the hypocrisy. What do you think her mother might have said?

Do as I say, not what I do.

What was she more likely to do?

To do as her mother did (Bandura, 1961, 1977, as cited in McLeod, 2011).

As the Australian songwriter, Paul Kelly, says, “What’s done to me, I’ll do to mine” (1986).

There is distance in a relationship. A says to B that he would appreciate it if they communicated more and did more things together. She agrees. However, B continues to go to parties without A and reduces contact. They turn up to an event they were invited to separately when they could have gone together. There’s a blazing row. What do you think A might say to B?

Something similar to *actions speak louder than words?*

Showing versus telling (show vs. tell) in the creative writing field works along a similar axiom. A picture (action/behaviour) is worth a thousand words.

In 1977, John Berger’s *The ways of seeing* used Magritte’s *Key of Dreams*, or *Interpretation of Dreams* (1937) to illustrate the gap or disconnect between what is seen and what is known (Berger, Blomberg, Fox, Dibb & Hollis, 1977, pp. 7–8). Magritte’s picture contains four panels. The top right is a picture of a horse. Next to it is a picture of a clock. Below the clock is a picture of suitcase, and next to that a jug. Below the horse is written ‘the door’; below the clock is written ‘the wind’; below the suitcase, ‘the valise’ and below the jug, ‘the bird’. Berger’s and Magritte’s points are commentary on “... the gap between words and seeing ...” (1977, p. 7).

For the purposes of this essay, I would like to concentrate on the image of the clock and the word below it, which is ‘wind’, and also a Jonathan Franzen quote from the novel “The Corrections” (2002) concerning itself with time. The quotation is featured two paragraphs below. The definite article before ‘wind’ indicates that the word is the

word we know to describe a breeze, a movement of air. It also brings to mind, in the process of pragmatic selection, the homonym 'wind', as in winding one's watch, which means that the choice of word with a clock may be a more natural pairing than initially thought. Even if the word were to be regarded as 'the wind' though—the movement of air—there might not necessarily be such a gap between this word and the image as first thought, especially in terms of metaphor.

If we take the word "wind" to represent a current of air, it can be argued that it and time are both associated with duration, and with the physical and metaphorical byway that time and the wind can pass through. Expressions such as "the passage of time," "time drags" (the absence of movement), "time and tide", "time travel", maybe even "time warp" or "timeless" (as the wind is) illustrate this.

To further support this I would like to present a quote from Jonathan Franzen's *Corrections* (2001):

Three in the afternoon was a time of danger in these gerontocratic suburbs of St. Jude. Alfred had awakened in the great blue chair in which he'd been sleeping since lunch. *He'd had his nap and there would be no local news until five o'clock. Two empty hours were a sinus in which infections bred.* He struggled to his feet and stood by the Ping-Pong table, listening in vain for Enid. (p. 3, my italics).

I want to draw attention to the line where time is described as being "... a sinus in which infections [breed]." Healthy sinuses are filled with air. A particular condition which contributes to sinusitis is nasal congestion—that is, lack of air flow ("An Overview of Sinusitis", 2005–2013). In Alfred's world, the sinus is a synecdoche for the nasal cavity (after all, two hours pass, ultimately, that is, air flows, ultimately) and this becomes a metaphor for the passage of time; a passage of time through which things move, albeit sluggishly. What kind of wind would be stirring in Alfred's neighbourhood, in his house, in this period of his life? Maybe none, or a heavy, phlegmatic current as implied by the words "sinus" and "infection". These two lines express many ideas, but one of them is the expression mentioned above that 'time drags', and another is, 'the passage of time'. As the characters are further developed, there is the implication that time brings death and deterioration, and all that leads up to it. The use of the adjective "gerontocratic", and the noun "nap" in the above paragraph also indicate that Alfred is not a young man.

In terms of the notion of time and wind, wind implies motion, and there is no motion, there is no movement in this imagery. The absence of wind, or motion, of life, is a key part of the imagery. There is the potential for wind, or movement, but it does not occur (anything can happen in two hours, but it does not). Time does not fly in St.

Jude. It not only drags—it stops and festers. This concept, these expressions, are not new. What is new, or interesting, are the ways in which both Magritte and Franzen choose to illustrate time and its associated qualities. How have they done this? To quote every creative writing teacher of the last hundred years, if not more, they have expressed the abstract through the concrete. This expression is achieved through “... an extraordinary juxtaposition of ordinary objects or an unusual context that gives new meaning to familiar things” (“Magritte”, 1996). Under the umbrella of “familiar things” falls familiar abstract thought such as the clichés and expressions we use to define our lives.

In Franzen’s quote, the passage of time is a *sinus*; the word itself is exact and ordinary but rarely used to describe a walkway, or a hallway, or duration. The very existence of this sinus—two empty hours in which infections bred—transposes expressions such as *empty time*, or *time on one’s hands*; and supports concepts of the inevitability of death, and the absence of life and liveliness. It is a very exact phrase which also alludes to expressions such as *idle hands make for the devil’s work*—or the idea that unfilled hours (and unfulfilled hours) bring the realisation of illness and demise a little closer. Sinuses/time in the text breed evil in the same way that time metaphorically combined with the devil does. Franzen expresses these abstract notions with very concrete image and language. The nouns *hours*, *sinus* and *infection* are all ordinary objects “juxtaposed”.

The verb “breed” describes time as some kind of incubator, and “infection” modifies this to make it malignant. “Empty” to describe “hours” is probably the only well known collocation. Through this juxtaposition of the ordinary—in Franzen’s case, employing mostly nouns and verbs to evoke exact and unusual imagery—he and Magritte both *show* their ideas as opposed to stating them, or telling them, baldly and blandly. The diversity of the concepts of time is not unknown to any potential reader, but Franzen’s individual representation of those concepts is what holds the reader’s interest.

To further illustrate this, imagine spot the difference pictures such as those seen in figure 1, p. 5, taken from an ESL text (Soars, 1986).

In either picture a middle-aged woman, slightly overweight, with a husband who seems to have a lot of money, is trying on a hat which she claims makes her look much younger. What might be the accepted abstract portrayed by these pictures? Perhaps, aging, vanity, more money than sense, etcetera. Naturally enough, a feminist, Marxist, socio-cultural and other readings can also be made. What are the ‘concretes’ that portray these clichéd ‘abstracts’? The woman’s appearance, what she says, the husband’s appearance, the unspoken dialogue between the shop assistant and the husband, or in creative writing terms, description, character, dialogue and action.



Figure 1. Spot the Difference (Soars, 1986).

Using these devices, showing rather than telling can be achieved. The following is an example of telling, of *not* allowing the story to reveal itself through some of the ideas proposed above: *A middle aged woman, who was nervous about her weight and had failing eyesight, was trying on a hat and mistook a poster for a mirror. She felt the hat made her look much younger and said so. Her rich husband exchanged glances, with the shop assistant, which said, My wife is fooling herself, but she thinks I have so much money, I can buy her youth again.*

However, if we look closely at the spot the difference pictures, they have the same basic idea, but are different. This is what we need to remember. You may want to write a story about a vain, middle-aged woman and her wealthy husband, or any variation on the theme, including inversions. And why not? The former is a universal, if somewhat patronising, theme. But the story one writer creates is going to be different from another, and that is what is wanted. It will be different because the concrete detail chosen, and many aspects, will be different from the concrete detail and aspects chosen by others. For example, look at the pictures in figure one. These pictures are a great writing tool. Imagine they are different aspects of the same subject, or the same idea. A case in point is that the speech in the first picture is lower case and the other upper

case. What does this imply about the speech and character of the speakers? Maybe the woman in picture one has a much softer voice and personality than the woman in picture two. Maybe she is intimidated, so she finds it difficult to speak loudly. Yet she is the same woman, in apparently the same situation, but the writer can make that choice to express abstract details about her through concrete expression. When writing stories, students need to keep in mind that they are their own stories. They come from individual imaginations, even though there are many shared experiences and societal assumptions that influence this.

Therefore, the abstract becomes concrete through careful language choice, and also by really ‘owning’ the story, and exploring ways in which an archetypal theme can become atypical, even while exploring and illuminating the universal. One way of achieving this is truly exploring any given scene for its glimmers of individuality, both to you and from you.

2a. The Dangers of Over-Summarisation

Naturally, novels or stories that delve *too* deeply into detail can be incredibly tedious. Writing students needs to decide when to summarise and when to expand upon a scene. Many beginning writers summarise their entire story, and this can be a fantastic blueprint for developing ideas, but it makes fairly dull reading. To summarise too much, can be to tell too much.

A summary is often employed when the writer wants to tell things quickly. It’s used to fill in the back-story, get across a characteristic of personality, or to skip across a couple of years (or decades), among other uses. Summary is often used more in short stories than novels as there might be one idea, or one thread of plot that is developed, rather than the multiple storylines that are possible in a novel.

In the short story “The Red-backed Spiders” (1952, 1982), Peter Cowan’s narrator (a farmhand on land that is being cleared) observes his employer and his employer’s family. His boss is a sour man, and one of the main points of the story is that the emotional poison that inhabits the employer poisons all around him, especially his son. At one point the narrator comments on the employer’s relationship with his wife and daughters: “The woman and the girls left the man alone, retreating in a knowledge that had been gained in bitterness and perhaps defeat.” Then the narrator comments on the boy’s relationship:

But the boy wanted his father, and his world was plainly incomplete without him. He would still go up to his father to talk to him, sometimes for the affection that seemed now inevitably denied, that perhaps had never been there, sometimes to ask the questions that his mind was filled with and that were reduced quickly to

the man's ridicule. So that he had become now too quiet and solitary for a boy of his age (1958, 1982, p. 109).

The relationship between the man and the boy is the major focus of the story, so that is Cowan's area of concentration. The relationship between the father and the woman and girls is deftly summarised with description that is precise and telling, but their history is not further expanded. The summary of the boy's relationship is more integral to the story, so it is elaborated.

This summary does not come at the beginning of the story, however. Cowan opens with action (the father hitting one of his daughters, p. 107) and the actions and interaction of the boy and the man in the following pages reveal a lot of the story before this summary is used as a form of commentary and back story. A quick telling tool. The amount of summary in a piece of fiction needs to be balanced.

2b. Show the Story Through Scenes Where Necessary

The following piece from the second part of a story written by Peter Gleeson, a first year creative writing student at the time, contrasts with the use of summary above, and illustrates the use of action, pace and movement to allow a story to unfold.

Eric Shaw had been trying very hard to concentrate on the white line. He'd been walking for at least half an hour now, and looking up he noticed he'd left the city and reached the park. A middle aged man in a tracksuit scatered by on the footpath.

'Get off the road.'

Eric jolted. Panicked momentarily, he shielded himself with his arms. There was nothing. The guy had startled him, that's all.

'Pish off' he mumbled.

Not far to go, he told himself.

Eric knew the edge of the park was about halfway. All he wanted now was to be home.

He played the last hand over in his mind again.

Dealer: 15

Player: 12

Should've sat on twelve. Fifteen's a weak hand ...

He saw the last of his chips get swept up.

He felt his hand being swept into a grinder and stripped right up to the elbow; nerve ends and tendons dangling frayed and bloody from his funny bone.

He saw the dealer press a button and felt the coldness of spinning concrete.

Shaking away the images of the casino, Eric tried to guess what his body was feeling. (2002, pp. 1–2, personal correspondence).

The first two lines *are* a summary of what Eric Shaw has been doing, leading quickly into what he is doing now. To bring the reader and the character right into the present, Gleeson employs action (and detail). A minor character jogs past Eric, on the footpath. The reader is already curious. We are not directly told that Eric is on the road, but there is a white line (“Eric Shaw had been trying very hard to concentrate on the white line”), so we think he may be on the road, and if this is the case, of course, we wonder why he is walking on the road. The man who jogs past him confirms our suspicions by telling Eric to, “get off the road”. At no stage does the writer tell the reader that Eric may be a bit unsettled or strange (and/or drunk), but the writer’s description of Eric’s actions (walking in the middle of the road, concentrating on the white line) and the actions and speech of a minor character confirm this for us. The fact the reader is not directly told what is happening also unsettles us a little, which further enhances the implied instability of Eric’s character. Magritte’s “unusual context” gives new meaning to familiar things. This is developed even further when, in the next paragraph, Eric defends himself from the minor character’s words. The narrative neatly sums up Eric’s (over) reaction to the passer-by: “Eric jolted. Panicked momentarily, he shielded himself with his arms. There was nothing. The guy had startled him, that’s all”. Action and some quick description of his emotional state with very concrete language, and no direct narrative judgment on that description allows the reader to be a detective. The author is showing us layers of this character and situation.

The reader gets additional insight to Eric’s instability when the narrative enters Eric’s head and replays last night’s events as Eric experienced them. He is at the casino. He loses a hand, as in a card hand, then a possible literal hand as “[h]e felt his hand being swept into a grinder and stripped right up to the elbow; nerve ends and tendons dangling frayed and bloody from his funny bone./ He saw the dealer press a button and felt the coldness of spinning concrete.”. The reader is then back in the present as Eric

“shakes away the images from the casino”. The reader, however, is left wondering, did that happen or not? As Eric defends himself with his arms in the opening paragraphs quoted, we assume he still has them, yet we wonder if something terrible happened at the casino; whether he was badly hurt. Can we trust this narrator? Can we trust Eric? Eric’s mental state is again illustrated without the third person narration needing to spell it out or further explain at this stage. Small scene upon small scene pushes the story forward and lets us discover Eric. Gleeson lets the story do the telling, and allows his readers to do the work. He does not reveal everything at once. He could have said: *Eric was wandering along the road in a fit of half madness and drunkenness. He’d forgotten his medication and was dangerously close to getting hit by a car*, which is a partial summary of what he has written, but nowhere near as effective as letting the story unfold and engaging the imagination of the reader. Scenes, especially those which are exact and individual, usually portray much more than a piece of fiction that reads like a synopsis due to overuse of summary. Effectively written scenes often show a whole lot more than they tell.

3. Within the Field of Creative Writing, be Wary of the Indirect and Passive Voice

Though this piece of advice might be regarded as an ‘old warhorse’, it still has a lot of merit, especially for beginning writers. For the most part the active voice is more effective in creative writing. It allows you to be more direct, succinct and gives your writing the appearance of confidence and ownership. In a 2001 lecture, the Australian writer, Tracy Ryan, stated that the passive voice is often used by politicians when no-one wants to take responsibility for anything. This is why it is employed in the media (Ryan, personal correspondence, 2001). Ideally, as creative writers, you know your scenes, you know your characters, you created your stories—take responsibility for them and write them with confidence.

As conservative and discredited as they have been (Pulman, 2009), the advice of Strunk and White that;

... the habitual use of the active voice makes for forcible writing ... Many a tame sentence of description or exposition can be made lively and emphatic by substituting a transitive in the active voice for some such perfunctory expression as *there is or could be heard*. (1959, 1999, pp. 18–19)

is largely sound, particularly, as stated before, for beginner pieces .

Examples from the text below are quite tortuous, and as a creative writing instructor, I have definitely received sentences similar to them, but they are not passive sentences (though Strunk and White labelled them as such), rather just not very direct sentences (Pullman, 2009).

Passive: There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground.

Active: Dead leaves covered the ground.

Passive: It was not long before she was very sorry that she had said what she had.

Active: She soon regretted her words. (1959, 1999, p. 19).

Another point Strunk and White make is that a sentence often has more strength when it is shorter, and the active sentence is often much less convoluted when it comes to creative pieces of writing. “Brevity is a by-product of vigor” (1959, 1999, p. 19). An added bonus is that active voice can allow you to reach the word limit more effectively too!

When the passive voice is used, the focus tends to be on the object. In terms of writing that is not as direct as it could be, I recommend looking through your work for points where *was* and *-ing* and *had* and *could* and *would* and *about to/began to* appear and see if they can be made more direct. For example, students often submit work which details things about to happen: *the train was beginning to turn the corner*. Though this describes a degree of a train turning a corner, unless it is crucial to some aspect of the story, “the train turned the corner” is more efficient, and superfluous detail is avoided. When these types of sentences are written more directly, often in present simple or past simple tense, a lot of telling disappears, as tangible images become by-products of the writing style. This is one of the major keys to the *show, don't tell* riddle, and once understood, is ridiculously simple to employ and extremely helpful. To make writing stronger (clearer), often the only thing needed is a more active tense (she wrote passively).

II. Conclusion

If writers wish to enhance the showing and the unfolding of their stories, the three points to remember are to

- express the abstract through the concrete
- do not over-summarise, and show the story through scenes where necessary, and showing scenes is often more necessary than summarising
- be wary of overusing the indirect, or passive, voices.

Needless to say, there are a thousand and one exceptions to all of these suggestions, and they are tools, not rules, but they certainly can make a great difference in transforming a turgid piece of writing into something more personal for both the writer and reader, and therefore more interesting and durable, and more likely to be read.

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